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AUTHOR MacGlashan, Ileene
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ABSTRACT

Research indicates that the use of children's literature can have a positive effect on both reading achievement and reading attitudes. The overemphasis on skills and the exclusive use of the basal reader does not appear to motivate students to become readers. Educators should be exposing children to worthwhile literature in order to motivate them to want to read and should be giving them the opportunity to practice the "whole act of reading." But a review of the research literature indicates that these recommendations are not currently being implemented in the classroom. (Fifteen references are attached.) (MM)

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What Research Says About Children's Literature And Reading Achievement

by Ileene MacGlashan

One of the goals of education should be to encourage children to learn on their own and to continue learning after they leave school. It is important for students to develop a love for reading so that it will become an activity in which they will choose to engage in voluntarily. Appreciation of literature and seeing the importance of reading is a learned behavior which must be taught according to Wold (1988). Because of the poor reading scores of so many students today there is much criticism concerning the teaching of reading.

Reading is a skill that requires practice to master. The more a child reads the better reader he is likely to be. Anderson, et al (1985) stated that avid readers do twenty times more reading than less frequent readers. This is a lot of practice and therefore it is not surprising that these students do better on achievement tests. Are our children reading today? Anderson, et al (1985) reported on a study of fifth graders that had found that 50% of the children read books for an average of four minutes a day or less, 30% for two minutes per day or less and 10% never read any book on any day. This can be contrasted with 130 minutes per day of television watching by many children. In the intermediate grades silent reading time may average only fifteen minutes a day according to Anderson, et al (1985). Other researchers also point to

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the fact that many students are not reading (Morrow, 1985; Winograd & Greenlee, 1986).

This lack of reading has implications because independent reading is a major source of reading fluency as stated by Anderson, et al (1985). It is thought to be important to vocabulary growth, Anderson mentions research that shows that after third grade, students learn most of their new words while reading books and other materials. The need for independent reading is mentioned often in the literature (Higgins, 1988; Morrow, 1987; and Anderson, 1985). Morrow (1985) did a descriptive study to find out the attitudes of principals and teachers toward voluntary reading. It was found that they considered it important but ranked it below comprehension, word recognition and study skills. Teachers were afraid to take time away from skill practice for fear of poor results on test scores. It was found that voluntary reading was not widely promoted in the schools.

Children are not reading much in school and are apparently not reading outside of school either. Television, sports, and other activities take precedence over reading. Yet it has been found, as mentioned by Morrow (1985), that voluntary readers tend to demonstrate high levels of reading achievement.

What students are doing in school is spending 70% of the reading instruction time doing seatwork or independent practice of skills according to what Anderson (1985) found in

the research. Usually the skill sheets require minimal reading and are often not related to the stories being used in the reading class. Workbooks and skill sheets take too much time and children need to spend more time in actual reading.

Some educators feel that skills must be mastered first before going onto good literature. But emphasis on skills may have the effect of developing a negative attitude toward reading especially in students that have had little introduction to reading prior to coming to school. Winograd & Greenlee (1986) describes a study in which poor students saw reading as decoding a list of words. It is important for students to see a connection between the skills and real reading, they must see that reading has a purpose.

The use of the basal reader may promote emphasis on skill teaching and take emphasis away from literature activities. Morrow (1987) did a study of basal reader manuals to see what type of literature activities were included. It was found that those activities that would promote voluntary reading were usually found in the supplemental section of the manual. Many teachers rarely use the supplemental section of the manual with any regularity. Most researchers believe that literature activities should be an integral part of the reading program rather than a supplemental part. One of these activities is allowing time in the class for independent reading. Morrow (1987), as described later, believes in the importance of a library corner in every classroom.

The integration of literature into the reading program would give children time to practice the skills taught. It would motivate students to read by exposing them to good literature and by putting books within easy reach. Sallee & Sethi (1982) mentioned a review done by Koeller of the past 25 years of the Reading Teacher (1981). It showed advocacy of children's literature has been prevalent for many years. The only challenge to the basal is still individualized reading and according to Bader, et al (1987) and others it is more effective than the basal program.

One component of a literature program is oral reading, meaning the teacher or other person reads to the students. There is agreement among most researchers that reading aloud is an important tool for preparing children for reading, and for motivating students to read (Wold, 1988; Anderson,et al (1985); Huck, 1968; Morrow, 1982, 1985, 1987; Frick, 1986; Giermak, 1980; Winogard & Greenlee, 1986). Besides motivation, oral reading of stories has other benefits and is recommended for children throughout the grades Anderson, et al (1985). It can sharpen listening skills, introduce students to new vocabulary, increase their background knowledge, and expose them to literature that they wouldn't choose on their own.

By reading aloud the teacher can use a good piece of literature to help students learn about plot, character, and other story parts. The reading can be followed by higher level

thinking questions. Literature can be used to teach the skills as Bader, et al (1987) shows in a study described later. But McMillan & Gentile (1988) cautions not to kill good literature through drill. The basal and literature programs should complement each other; there is a time for teaching reading and a time for literature (Frisk, 1986; Huck, 1968).

Test scores show that children are having difficulty comprehending what they read. Higgins (1988) reported on studies that showed that educators are doing an adequate job teaching decoding skills at the primary level but comprehension skills are not being taught as successfully at the intermediate level. He mentions Durkin's 1978 study which showed only 45 minutes of comprehension instruction out of a total of 17,997 minutes of classroom observation. Higgins (1988) found evidence that basals have little in them to comprehend so he asks if we aren't using the wrong material to teach comprehension. Children's literature is full of things worth comprehending. It also provides historical, scientific, mathematical, artistic and literary information according to McMillan & Gentile (1988). At the intermediate level students need to be taught reading strategies and how to read in the content areas. If the students have only read in the basal and have not been exposed to literature then they may have trouble with this transition to content area reading.

Morrow (1986) conducted an experimental study because of discouraging reports recently on the decrease in the number of adult readers. It was thought to be important to find ways to encourage voluntary reading. The purpose of this follow-up study was to look at reading behavior rather than scores on tests. The controls were 20 minutes of daily literature activities as an integral part of the reading program and the use of library corners. The library corners followed specific guidelines. A time series design was used. Data was collected ten weeks prior to intervention, nine weeks during and three weeks after intervention. Three different questionnaires were used to determine student's interest in books and their use of free time outside of school. The results were an increase in student selection of literature as a free-choice activity, which meant increase in 'actual reading'. More studies are needed to determine if such a literature program would improve reading achievement. Morrow also noticed an attitude change in teachers who thought that this type of program would take away from skill teaching, or that there wouldn't be enough room in the classroom for a library corner. The teachers chose to continue many of the literature activities after the study ended.

Morrow (1987) conducted a study to determine the effect of a recreational reading program on voluntary reading. There have been other studies conducted which show a correlation

between recreational reading and school success in reading achievement, comprehension and vocabulary development. The author's goal was to promote voluntary reading. Morrow has done a number of studies dealing with this topic of voluntary reading. In this particular study, experimental groups of children ages six through ten, in four recreational centers, participated in 75 minutes of recreational reading four days a week for eight weeks. The activities included quiet reading, teacher directed literature or reading rainbow tapes, free choice time and a five to ten minute 'summary of the day' period. Before and after interviews were used to determine if improved attitudes towards books had occurred. The results were positive.

Giermak (1980) used oral reading with remedial high school English classes, most of the students had not been successful in school and many had never read a book. It improved their listening, thinking, and writing skills but was mainly an attitudinal improvement toward books.

Bader, Veatch, & Eldredge (1987) did a study to determine the effect of the use of trade books versus the use of the basal readers in the teaching of reading. Part of the treatment was daily reading by the teachers to the second grade children, and the asking of higher level thinking questions. "The bulk of the reading period was spent in children reading, the teacher reading to children, and activities to stimulate interest in reading" (p. 64). They found that the use of children's literature had a positive effect on the reading achievement

as well as the interest in reading by the students. Bader also mentioned in his review of literature a number of studies done to compare the basal with the individualized reading programs and found out of 160 programs studied between 1937 and 1971 there were 120 that favored individualized, 20 favored the basal and 20 were neutral. To these studies Bader, Veatch, and Eldredge have added theirs in favor of individualized programs or more specifically the use of children's literature or trade books. They did not mention the use of the basal reader as part of any of the individualized programs.

Boodt (1984) her hypothesis was that critically listening to literature could promote reading for pleasure. She studied fourth through sixth grade remedial students to see whether direct instruction in critical thinking, using children's literature, would improve their critical thinking and general reading comprehension skills. She used a pretest-posttest control group research design. It positively affected reading performance. She also found improved attitudes toward reading. The researcher felt this was especially effective for remedial students who often received little critical thinking instruction and often saw no connection between reading skills taught and actual reading.

Sallee and Sethi (1982) did an experimental study to determine the effect of adding folklore to the basal reading program of second graders. It was found to positively affect their

reading achievement, which supported the results of other studies. The authors chose folklore because of the evidence showing it to be one of great interest to students but it is found rarely in the basal readers. The low ability students made the greatest gain in achievement. This supports other studies which have found that reading interest affects reading achievement.

Cohen (1968) her study is often mentioned in the literature. She conducted an experimental study using second graders. There were 130 control and 155 experimental from seven different schools. The control was story reading. Both groups used the same basal reading program. The experimental group showed an increase in both vocabulary and word knowledge significant at .005 and in reading comprehension significant at (.01). There was no significant difference in word discrimination. The results of the lowest classes in word knowledge were significant. The results of the lowest classes taken separately from the entire group showed improvement even greater than the entire group. This showed the importance of the oral exposure to books for students whose experience during preschool years may have been limited.

In summary, research indicates that the use of children's literature can have a positive effect on both reading achievement and reading attitudes. The overemphasis on skills and the exclusive use of the basal reader does not appear to

motivate students to become readers. What are the implications for the classroom? Educators should be exposing children to worthwhile literature in order to motivate them to want to read and should be giving them the opportunity to practice the 'whole act of reading'. But research indicates that these recommendations aren't being implemented in the classrooms today.

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